

Feb. 12, 2023

Written Testimony Submitted to the Connecticut General Assembly Joint Human Services Committee in support of HB 6616: An Act Concerning Expansion of HUSKY Health Benefits to Those Ineligible Due to Immigration Status.

Dear Co-Chairs Sen. Lesser and Rep. Gilchrist, Ranking Members Sen. Seminara and Rep. Case, and Distinguished Members of the Human Services Committee:

My name is Pat Spring and I'm a member of the Greater Hartford Immigration Coalition. My church, St. Patrick-St. Anthony in Hartford, is a member of the Greater Hartford Interfaith Action Alliance (GHIAA), a broad-based organization of 49 faith institutions working together to advance social justice in our region and state.

I am writing in support of HB 6616: An Act Concerning Expansion of HUSKY Health Benefits to Those Ineligible Due to Immigration Status. Personally, this issue matters to me because volunteers within our coalition have seen refugees without health insurance wait to seek medical care because of the expense. We have also observed less than conscientious care in one case and wonder whether the patient's lack of health insurance was taken into consideration. In that case, when an adolescent was hemorrhaging, the emergency room staff sent her home and she almost died. She ended up having to be admitted and was given five blood transfusions. If she had health insurance, would they have been so quick to send her home?

My faith teaches me that every human being is a child of God and deserves to be cared for accordingly, regardless of their race, national origin, citizenship, or immigration status. I believe that health care is a human right and a society's sacred duty. I support this bill because it is the right thing to do for human beings who have fled their home countries to escape violence and threats on their lives, and because preventative care and treating a health problem early costs less money and has better health outcomes.

Many members of the immigrant community, including 58% of undocumented folks in our state, are without any form of health insurance to cover mental or physical health care (compared to just 5% of the overall population). In addition, being a member of a marginalized community increases the risk of mental health challenges due to the impacts of prejudice and systemic oppression. Meanwhile, undocumented people pay \$187 million annually in Connecticut taxes.

I am particularly concerned about the nationwide mental health crisis that has only deepened since the pandemic. It's hard enough to find care when you have coverage, but our uninsured neighbors are left with even fewer resources. Paying out of pocket is unaffordable even for middle-income people, let alone for folks with lower incomes. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness of Connecticut, of the 561,000 adults in Connecticut with a mental health condition, 160,000 went without needed care in the past year, and one-third of them did so because of cost.

Unlike some private coverage, HUSKY insurance offers true mental health parity, covering mental health on par with physical health. Expanding access to HUSKY by passing HB 6616 will provide critical access to care, including for adolescents and young adults. Major mental health disorders often emerge in late adolescence and early adulthood. According to an independent analysis by the RAND Corporation, if Connecticut expands HUSKY to all income-qualified people, regardless of immigration status, roughly 21,400 currently uninsured people will gain coverage, providing vast benefits in quality of life, family

stability, school attendance, workforce participation, and more. This cost of this expansion would represent only 3% of the state's annual Medicaid budget. Furthermore, much of this cost would be balanced out by savings in expenses for emergency Medicaid and uncompensated care – an estimated \$63 to \$72 million.

Extending insurance access until age 26, as this bill does, would match the provisions of the Affordable Care Act, whose policymakers recognized that emerging adults (including parents, workers, and students), their families, and society as a whole do better when people have continuous access to care during this period. Expanding HUSKY to undocumented people is supported by a majority of Connecticut voters. Consider: 57% of voters support expanding HUSKY to all undocumented immigrants, including 84% of Democrats, 83% of Black voters, and 76% of Latinx voters.

Expanding HUSKY access to all income-eligible people, regardless of immigration status, will meaningfully expand access to mental and physical health care to people who are excluded. It is economically sensible, and more than that, it is the moral, just, and ethical thing to do. HB 6616 is an important step in this direction.

Please advance this bill out of committee in its current form, and then champion it in the full legislature. I look forward to supporting your efforts. Thank you for your leadership on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Pat Spring,

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